DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 396 255 CS 012 496

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TITLE	Yes, There Is Magic in Literature--But Is There an "Mmmm" Sound in Magic? Instructional Resource No. 27.
INSTITUTION	National Reading Research Center, Athens, GA.; National Reading Research Center, College Park, MD.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	96
CONTRACT	117A20007
NOTE	32p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Beginning Reading; Case Studies; Classroom Communication; Grade 1; Primary Education; *Reading Instruction; Reading Skills; *Teacher Behavior; Teacher Student Relationship; Teaching Methods; *Whole Language Approach
IDENTIFIERS	Direct Instruction

ABSTRACT

Concerns have been expressed both in the popular press and in the professional literature regarding skills instruction and the literature-based movement. There is a growing perception that direct instruction in "basic" skills is discouraged within a literature-based philosophy. This booklet challenges this perception as a myth through the inspection of skills instruction in a first-grade classroom by a teacher who is deeply immersed and committed to a literature-based instructional teachers, learners, males, females, Engliah-as-a-Second-Language successful in developing students' control over the convention of print and independence in reading through explicit and direct instruction. (Author/RS)

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Yes, There Is Magic in Literature—But Is There an "Mmmm" Sound in Magic?

Debra Price
James V. Hoffman
Sarah McCarthey
with Patti Bridwell

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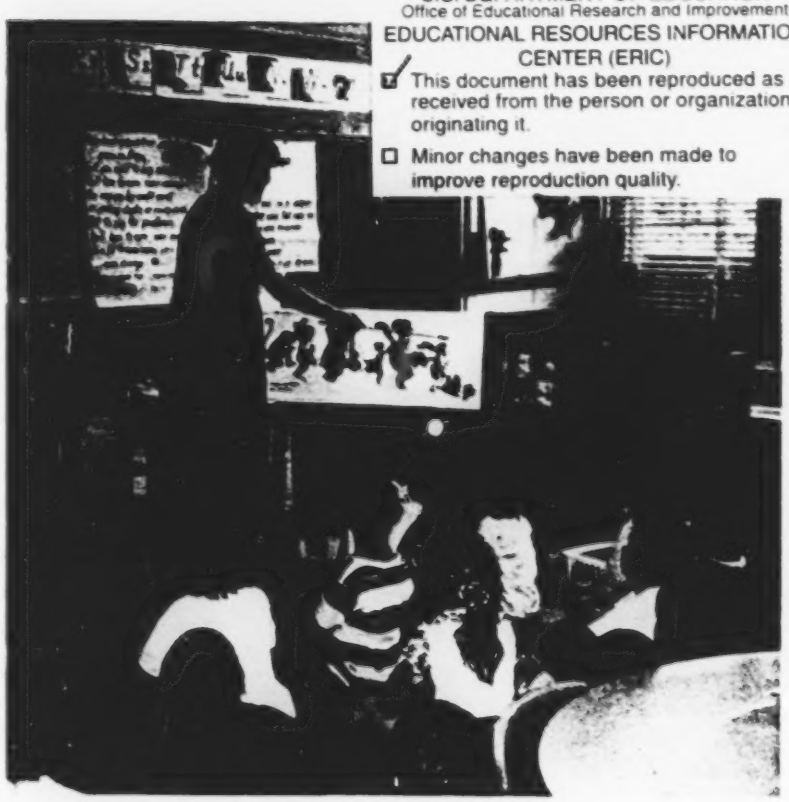

CS012496

NRRC
National Reading Research Center
Instructional Resource No. 27
Summer 1996

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Debra Price
James V. Hoffman
Sarah J. McCarthey
The University of Texas—Austin

with

Patti Bridwell
Gullett Elementary School
Austin Independent School District

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The National Reading Research Center (NRRC) is funded by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement of the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research on reading and reading instruction. The NRRC is operated by a consortium of the University of Georgia and the University of Maryland College Park in collaboration with researchers at several institutions nationwide.

The NRRC's mission is to discover and document those conditions in homes, schools, and communities that encourage children to become skilled, enthusiastic, lifelong readers. NRRC researchers are committed to advancing the development of instructional programs sensitive to the cognitive, sociocultural, and motivational factors that affect children's success in reading. NRRC researchers from a variety of disciplines conduct studies with teachers and students from widely diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds in pre-kindergarten through grade 12 classrooms. Research projects deal with the influence of family and family-school interactions on the development of literacy; the interaction of sociocultural factors and motivation to read; the impact of literature-based reading programs on reading achievement; the effects of reading strategies instruction on comprehension and critical thinking in literature, science, and history; the influence of innovative group participation structures on motivation and learning; the potential of computer technology to enhance literacy; and the development of methods and standards for alternative literacy assessments.

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Dissemination is an important feature of NRRC activities. Information on NRRC research appears in several formats. *Research Reports* communicate the results of original research or synthesize the findings of several lines of inquiry. They are written primarily for researchers studying various areas of reading and reading instruction. The *Perspective Series* presents a wide range of publications, from calls for research and commentary on research and practice to first-person accounts of experiences in schools. *Instructional Resources* include curriculum materials, instructional guides, and materials for professional growth, designed primarily for teachers.

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Patti Bridwell is a first-grade teacher at Gullett Elementary School in the Austin Independent School District. Ms. Bridwell has been a leader in the literature-based movement in the Austin area. She has also been actively involved as a mentor in the teacher education program at The University of Texas.

National Reading Research Center
Universities of Georgia and Maryland
Instructional Resource No. 27
Summer 1996

Yes, There is Magic in Literature—But is there an "Mmmm" Sound in Magic?

Abstract. *Concerns have been expressed both in the popular press and in the professional literature regarding skills instruction and the literature-based movement. There is a growing perception that direct instruction in "basic" skills is discouraged within a literature-based philosophy. Through this article, we challenge this perception as a myth. We do so through the inspection of skills instruction in one first-grade classroom by a teacher who is deeply immersed and committed to a literature-based instructional philosophy. We describe the many ways in which this teacher is successful in developing students' control over the convention of print and independence in reading through explicit and direct instruction.*

The literature-based movement in reading instruction has swept the country and is working its magic. Teachers, freed from the constraints of vocabulary-controlled readers, are discovering the potential for quality literature to motivate students to learn to read. Students, immersed in rich literary experiences, are discovering new ways to think about themselves, their world, and their place in it. Not everyone is convinced, however, that the magical qualities of literature translate directly into student success in learning to read. We see concerns expressed in the media over the failure of the "new"

approaches to address such basic issues as the teaching of basic decoding skills. We write in response to those critics who suggest that direct instruction in "basic skills" is incompatible with a literature-based teaching philosophy. We invite you to inspect, through the data we have gathered, the teaching and learning in one first grade classroom. We hope the description is educative toward potential models for teaching skills in the context of literature.

The Teacher

Patti Bridwell has been teaching first grade for 10 years. She describes her preparation to teach in fairly traditional terms and not particularly influential on her thinking. Far more influential for her have been her experiences in her own classroom with students, her professional reading ("Reggie Routman has been a big influence on me."), and her interactions with her colleagues. She is a supporter of literature-based/ whole language instructional approaches and rejects the skills-based teaching philosophy incorporated in traditional basals.

> *"I never was a basal teacher. I couldn't stand reading another story about Mr. Fig. I thought I was ready to strangle those characters."*

Patti believes in integration of the language arts and thematic teaching. She believes basic skills can and should be taught through literature. The skills that are to be taught should be determined based on the

needs of the students not on an established scope and sequence. She has targeted literacy goals for her students that include: fluency, expression, confidence, and enjoyment.

The Context

Patti has taught in three different schools—all in the same district and always at the first-grade level. The first move was prompted by the opening of a new school to relieve overcrowding in the school where she was teaching. Both of these schools served "at-risk" children in a low-socioeconomic community. Two years ago, Patti applied for a transfer based on a perceived lack of administrative support for her teaching philosophy. She received a transfer the next year and moved to teach in a school serving a more middle to upper-middle class socioeconomic community. Patti's current classroom is "self-contained" with 22 students. While there are no Teacher Aides assigned to the classroom, parent volunteers are an important part of her instructional plan.

For the past 4 years, Patti has participated (as 1 of 14 teachers) in a longitudinal study of beginning reading instruction in first-grade classrooms. This study, supported by a grant from the National Reading Research Center, is focused on issues of literature-based instruction. We have observed in her classroom on at least 30 separate occasions during this 4-year period. Patti has participated in over 15 structured interviews, and countless informal interviews, regarding

her teaching philosophy and teaching practices. All of these interviews have been transcribed and all of the field notes from the observations have been analyzed. In addition, we have conducted numerous assessments in her classroom each year with a random group of 6 students using such informal measures as: reading interest/attitude scales, running records, phonemic awareness tasks, writing samples, and so on. Using a combination of qualitative research strategies and methodologies, we have attempted to represent her teaching practices and teaching philosophy as well as the elements of the teaching/learning transactions that are part of literacy instruction in her classroom.

We will attempt to describe Patti's classroom first through a "visit" on a "typical day." The description is reconstructed from the field notes collected during several observations. We will detail in quite specific terms the attention to "code" offered during the day. Our attention to a "typical day" is somewhat problematic since Patti's classroom operates on several cyclical patterns that are nested within one another. In other words, there are weekly cycles, unit cycles, seasonal cycles, and even yearlong cycles that undergird her teaching and her curriculum. To focus in on one day is more a matter of convenience for us than a reality for her students. Following our description of "one day," we will summarize some of the principles that represent Patti's approach to the teaching of code in the context of literature. These principles are derived from the entire data set we have collected on Patti over the course of 4 years.

One Day in the Life Of . . .

8:00 am

As Patti's students enter the classroom, they sign in on the large book prominently displayed inside the door. Their signatures follow the signatures of their teacher and student teacher, and provide for Patti, a record of their increasing proficiency with written letter formation. After that, Patti's day begins much like the day of other first-grade teachers. The students focus on the calendar, discussing yesterday, today, and tomorrow as well as the weather; count the number of days they've been in school; and add a one to their place-value chart. Once these early morning routines are completed, Patti takes a seat at the front of the classroom at the overhead projector and begins a morning message to the children. As she writes, the children will anticipate and predict what word will be projected up on the screen in front of them. Several voices will call out "good" as they see the letter *G* appear on the screen. Today, however, Patti surprises them by writing a "u" after the "G." The students pause as she continues to write *Guten Morgan, Kinder*. A few of the students put together all of the sounds and come quite close to the actual words, before one child finally blurts out "Guten Morgan, Kinder." Patti pauses to praise the student, remind the class that the beginning of a message is called a greeting, and then explains, "Guten Morgan, Kinder, is the way German people say Good Morning, Children." The rest of the morning message follows

with children making predictions, and Patti commenting on those predictions while continuing to write. She continues to extend and focus particular children on specific areas of need as the message unfolds.

Patti: A new sentence starts with what type of letter?

Students: Capital *I*.

Patti: This word's a hard word. (*The students sit silently watching her letters appear on the screen.*)

A Few Students: W-W-W, when.

Many students: was.

Patti: I said it was a hard word, you're not supposed to get it (*students laugh*). I was.

Patti and Students: I was at a meeting.

Patti: Good, can you help me spell meeting? /m/ (*writes m*) /ee/.

Students: e, e.

Patti: Two es good. Meet–ing.

Students: i-n-g.

Patti: I was at a meeting. Good. Period. New sentence.

Patti and students: I learned.

Patti: Excuse me, excuse me. But how are you all knowing all these words.

Students: We're reading your mind.

Patti and students: I learned a lot of things.

Patti: Let's see if we can spell things. Chris.

Chris: F.

Patti: You think an *F*. Let me show you. Look at my mouth. Th-ings. Like in Th–ursday. See how my tongue kind of goes up. Th–ings. If it were an *F*, it would be fings. See how my mouth looks different. Anybody know what things begins with.

Students: Th.

Patti: *Th*. It does sound almost like an *F*, doesn't it Chris? And it's not until you can really hear that beginning sound that you can tell the difference.

When the message is completed, Patti invites the students to read the entire message aloud with her and to make comments about what they have noticed about the print. These comments may center on message format, particular letters or words that catch a students attention, or connections to other experiences the students have had with print.

Taylor: In Patti, it sounds like there isn't suppose to be two *t*s, but there is.

Patti: That's right. And you just have to know how to spell Patti to know there are two *t*s. Good observation.

Alex: In Patti, there's a Pat. If you took away the *t* and the *i*, and then you put a Hutchins, it would spell Pat Hutchins.

Patti: Oh My Goodness. . . . Alex, could you just get a bigger smile on your face or what? Oh, and who is Pat Hutchins?

Students: A favorite author.

Patti: A favorite author. Good. Oh that brings tears to my eyes.

Chris: My dad went to a meeting last night.

Patti: He went to a meeting last night, just like I do, huh? Thinking about something in your life, that goes with the morning message. Nice connection. Brooke.

Brooke: I see a lot of punctuation marks.

Patti: A lot of punctuation marks, Brooke, I love how you call those punctuation marks. Good for you. You're using the right word. Punctuation marks are exclamation points, commas, colons, periods. And there are a lot of them in here. You can come up and circle them when you come to library. Max?

Max: There are four *g*s.

Patti: Four Gs. Golly. You can circle them too.

While all of these skills are just briefly touched on, they will be revisited at several other times during the day, or over the course of the week. Those children who are ready for more sophisticated skill acquisition are encouraged to make those observations. Those children who are still working on word boundaries or letter/sound relationships make those observations.

8:25am

Patti calls the children to the carpet for Warm-ups, Old Favorites, and New Story. As they make their way

to the carpet, many children are already commenting on the "new warm-up" that they see hanging on chart paper on the blackboard in front of them. The warm-up usually features a short poem, or song with lots of rhyming words, predictable finishes, or familiar words, phrases, or tunes. They may have noticed words in all capital letters, print done in different colors, or "a lot of letter Is." As they seat themselves, they are directed to the new warm-up. Usually, before she even reads the words, Patti asks the children what they notice about the new warm-up. The discussion that follows stems from a combination of what the children have noticed, and what skills Patti knows still need to be introduced. The children receive many reminders about letters, sounds, punctuation, and sight words from day to day from Patti and the rest of the students.

Patti: I want you to scan it and tell me what you notice about the print. Nicholas?

Nicholas: It's almost looks like B-E-A-R at the end.

Patti: It almost looks like B-E-A-R, Ms. Martin at the end, Nicholas is thinking he's seen this warm-up. He's noticing the print at the bottom, and it reminds him of the warm-up B-E-A-R, Bear. What reminds you of that warm-up? (*Patti refers the comment to Ms. Martin, the student teacher, so that she may jot down this observation for Nicholas's portfolio.*)

Nicholas: The word.

Patti: Do you want to come point to what you're talking about that reminds you of that, because you know what? This warm-up is just like B-E-A-R, Bear. Yes. And do you remember what this says down here. Any,

Patti and Students: M-O-R-E, more.

Patti: Any other observations? Belle?

Belle: I see gos and sees.

The discussion continues on the new warm-ups with comments about capital letters, patterns, and specific letters that appear in children's names.

Monty: I found two letters in my name.

Patti: And what are those two letters?

Monty: M-o.

Patti: Yeah, but look right here Monty. What's the next letter in your name? M-o- what?

Monty: N.

Patti: M-o-n, so this word sounds like the beginning of Monty. MON and then we have STER.

Monty and Monster have the same letters at the beginning that make them say a sound.

The children are given lots of opportunities to comment on the passage, and then listen to the teacher read it aloud. They then read aloud with her one or more times. New warm-ups may always follow the same pattern, but they are chosen with several factors in mind: readability, predictability, familiarity, and for the particular skills which may be made explicit by the teacher if the students fail to notice something on their own. While this may happen occasionally, you can depend on some students making a similar observation on their own when given a piece of text featuring the same skill.

8:40am

Patti quickly revisits the warm-ups from the previous day or two. The children may be substituting words to make a new warm-up, or just rereading a favorite.

8:50am

Old favorites and New Story provide the children further opportunities to focus on print in addition to exposing them to different vocabulary, genres, authors, and illustrators. These stories allow Patti a vehicle for instruction on book awareness. The students identify title pages, copyright dates, tables of contents, and

different types of print location. They discuss the rich and varied language, rhythms and rhymes, and make connections between the literature and their own lives and experiences.

By spending time each day on a story they heard the previous day, Patti builds on the familiarity of the text, and reviews those skills focused on the previous day. The amount of time spent discussing the Old Favorite is generally brief, but it allows her time to remind the children about skills and strategies they are adding to their personal store of "background knowledge."

The New Story (chosen for features that help to further her goals of building fluency, expression, confidence, and enjoyment) is introduced to the students, read aloud, and then discussed. Often the New Story is in big book form, so that the students may easily focus on the print and follow along as the book is being read. When big books are not available, Patti makes an effort to show the text to the children as they respond.

Patti: The New Story we are going to read is a song. But I'm just going to read it to you first, and then I'll tell you the tune of it later. And it's called *Oh A Hunting We Will Go*. (*Several students comment, or murmur*, "I like this book" *or* "I've heard this book.") How many of you have heard the song? You know how I know this is a song? Because on the very back I see some music notes, some musical

notes. And I know that this is a song, and it tells me the tune. This is done by John Wainstaff, and the pictures are by Nancy Parker. *Oh A Hunting We Will Go.* Do you think this story's going to be fiction or nonfiction?

Students: Fiction.

Patti: I know that there's a word for a story that is fiction, but it has a lot of fact to it. It's realistic fiction, but that's not the word I'm looking for. I'll have to look at my list of genres to find out what that word is. Yes Chris.

Chris: You could look in the dictionary.

Patti: We could Chris, but do you know what? I wouldn't know what letter to look under. See the dictionary is when I know a word, and I'm trying to figure out what that word means or how to spell that word. But I don't even know where in the dictionary to look. And there are so many thousands and thousands of words. It would take me days to read every word and what they mean. I know the meaning but I don't know the word. Danielle said she thought it might be novel. And I was telling Danielle that novel is another type of book. Like the books I read aloud in the afternoon to you. A big thick book. Those are novels. They tell a story that takes big chapters, a lot of

pages. But that's not the word, but we're going to get the word.

Patti reads the story aloud, and then invites the children to join in on the rereading. As they read, they predict upcoming words based on what will make sense and with what letters the words begin. Patti helps them to sound out those words that give them difficulty. At the conclusion of the story, the children are always invited to respond to the text, to the print, or to make connections between this story and an Old Favorite, or to their lives and experiences.

9:25am

Morning message, Warm-ups, Old Favorite, and New Story may end the whole class instruction time; but the children are encouraged to continue to make observations about print, connect these experiences to other learning situations, and respond to literature throughout the remainder of the day. The next hour is spent in inquiry pursuits with informational, nonfiction texts as the students engage in project work spanning other curricular areas like science and social studies. As the children write, Patti circulates, aiding with writing by helping sound out particular words, commenting on, or questioning about others.

Patti: What are you going to put here, Rachel? What do you want to say about the parts of a plant?

Rachel: The flowers have petals.

Patti: Okay. And you have written *The*. How will you write flowers? What sound do you hear at the beginning of fl–owers? /Fl/. . . .

Rachel: /Fl/. . ./F/. . ./l/. . .F-L.

Patti: Yes, F-l. What next? /ow/ Remember those letters that say /ow/? We would put a bandaid on them, because they hurt.

Rachel: o-w.

Patti: Good, Rachel, o-w. Now /ers/.

Rachel: /ers/ r-s?

Patti: Write r-s.

10:35 am

During readers workshop, some students are involved in independently reading texts and responding in a response journal. Discussions with the children about what they have read and written form a major part of this time period. Those students not ready to read conventionally from extended text, read in small groups in books that were chosen by Patti to help them attain those reading strategies necessary for success. These small group lessons may focus on word bound-

aries, letter/sound relationships, picture cues, or any other skill identified by Patti as needing further attention for a particular student.

Patti: What do you notice about the print on this page?

Students: It repeats what was said on the other page. It is a pattern.

Patti: Yes it has a pattern. Anything else.

Student: These words all begin with a *p*.

Patti: (*As she helps a student frame the individual words*) Yes, peach, pear, and plum all begin with a *p*, or a /p/ sound.

Patterns and Principles

Code instruction occurs throughout the day, but specifically during those lessons which focus on print. In addition to the morning message and warm-ups, the children spend time in small groups engaged in reading a particular book. Patti will help those children that need specific attention in letter/sound relationships during these small-group time periods. Because these groups tend to be more heterogeneous in make-up, attention may be paid to those skills most needed by a particular group of children. The whole-class focus on books during the warm-up sessions allows children to

be exposed to the thinking and noticings of their classmates.

In addition to time spent reading and rereading texts, the students are given ample opportunity to review and practice code through many different writing activities that occur during the day. These writing experiences may be done in small groups, pairs, or individually. Small groups get together weekly to write newsletter entries that will be typed by Patti and sent home to the parents on Friday. The students will decide on four or five topics, one student will volunteer to be the recorder (this changes with every weekly newsletter), and other students choose which article they wish to help with. Then in these small groups they help each other sound out and speil those words needed for their article.

Patti has attempted to integrate science and social studies concepts into her literature-based instruction through the personal inquiry projects based on nonfiction texts. Each first-grade student is paired with a kindergarten student for the purpose of research writing across the curriculum. Informational texts are provided for the children to peruse and take notes. These notes are then put together to form a research report. The entire process can take a few weeks, but the children work together to produce readable text. This project work is accompanied by direct instruction on note taking, using informational texts, and project writing. The students are encouraged to use the code instruction they receive in writing their notes and reports.

Journals are another time when children are given daily opportunities to make their code instruction explicit. Patti continually circulates during these writing times to help the students sound out necessary words, or to comment on how well a student did on their own. The small group work and pairs activities allow the students to assist each other as they write.

Implications and Reflections

In Patti's classroom, the magic of literature is clearly at work. The children are enthusiastic consumers and producers of quality texts. Literature is the motivating context for teaching students about the code (i.e., sound symbol relationships) and the conventions (e.g., spelling, grammar) of our language. The instruction is explicit and direct. Because this instruction is offered at the "point of use," it is quickly internalized by the students and generalized for future use. Yes, the sound of *M* as /Mmmm/ is heard in this classroom. However, this explicit attention to code does not take away from the students' enthusiasm for learning—in fact, the growing independence that comes through learning the code and conventions foster even greater cycles of enthusiasm.

What can be "proven" from the study of one classroom? Not much. But one case can "disprove" a theoretical proposition, in this case the proposition that direct instruction in basic skills is incompatible with a literature-based teaching philosophy. The data we have offered for your consideration do not suggest that

effective instruction in basic skills is in place in the classrooms of all teachers who claim a literature-based philosophy. Rather, these data simply suggest that effective instruction in basic skills can not only exist but flourish in the context of a literature-based philosophy. Perhaps this teacher is the "exception" and not the rule. She is exceptional in many regards. However, there is nothing about her instructional strategies that is outside the reach of any teacher who subscribes to the same beliefs about children, language, and learning. As success stories like this one from Patti's classroom are shared within our profession, new traditions are bound to emerge. These new frameworks for instructional activities, patterns of interaction, plans for assessment, and the like, will become part of our standards for judging effective practices. Only in this way will we be able to move away from models of instruction in basic skills that are simply imported from our past (e.g., skills-based) experience.

Authors Note. This instructional resource can be used in conjunction with the video-tape of the same title.

Further Reading

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Notes

The work reported herein was prepared with partial support from the National Reading Research Center of the University of Georgia and University of Maryland. It was supported under the Educational Research and Development Centers Program (PR/AWARD NO. 117A20007) as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed here do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the National Reading Research Center, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education.

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